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ABSTRACT

American education has long equated reading with the narrower notion of literacy. Such an approach bypasses the concept of "difficulty," or the placing of ideas into question. The educational system has resisted adoption of a broader view of reading, because: (1) anything difficult is viewed as elitist and undemocratic; and (2) the concept of "difficulty" arises from such "alien" disciplines as philosophy and psychoanalysis. The idea of reading as an interpretive activity removes the interdisciplinary boundaries. Poetry, for example, inhabits a space where logic and clarity do not hold sway, where language opens up strange paths that defy all intellectual classifications and attempts at possession. Radical questioning of the legitimacy of knowledge and the function of the university has been resisted by both academia and marginalized groups. Problematization, or the bringing of an issue to difficulty, defers solution and closure. Traditional feminist and minority discourse become the representation of the culture, without either "literature" or "culture" being put into question. Newer approaches to criticism reject the possibility of metatheory which classifies the "whole" from a privileged point of view and identifies reading with estrangement and difficulty. If the work of theory is the problematizing of reading, theory stands in opposition to the institution. Theory ultimately puts the institution's role, organization, and relation to knowledge into question. While the sciences fit in well in the academy, the humanities' role is to problematize method and engage the classroom and the university in difficulty. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (SG)

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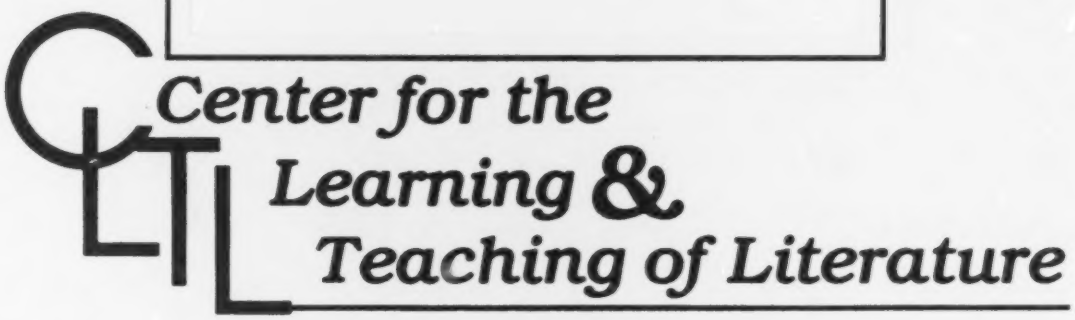
The Difficulty of Reading

Helen Elam



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The Difficulty of Reading

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American culture does not take well to the idea of difficulty. Our penchant is for one-step, one-stop solutions to problems, and we expect and demand in all areas of life, including reading, an ease of achievement that is antithetical to thought itself. Ads in the paper speak of special pills for those who want to lose weight without exercising or changing their eating habits. Language programs teach "how to" speak a language in a few easy lessons. Products are either fixable or disposable, and even mental disorders are perceived in terms of therapeutic closure or cure. Difficulty is there to be overcome, disposed of, certainly not to become the invisible partner of our daily lives. An episode of Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy captures well this movement towards answers, solutions, the transcendence of the problem. A supercomputer is asked to come up with "the meaning of life, the universe, and everything." Seven million years later, the supercomputer comes up with an answer: "42." The quest for solutions is synonymous with a reductiveness which leaves aside the problematic movement of thought. Students often tackle "education" as if it were a puzzle to be considered solved when every piece is in place. But an education--or reading-- worthy of its name will recognize that when the puzzle is finally put together into a perfect whole there is always one piece left over which forces us to rethink the edifice we have erected.

The connection of the concept of difficulty with thought itself, and therefore with the very activity of reading, goes back several centuries. Heidegger makes the connection when he refers to "the difficult work of thought" (Hartman, 1987, p. 198), but Plato in several of his dialogues contends with this very issue. The Theaetetus tackles a crucial question for philosophy: what is knowledge and how is it that we know? By the end of the dialogue, Socrates, who has been proclaiming his role as "midwife" and his capacity to separate the true from the false, recognizes that in the question of knowledge we cannot separate what we know from how we know, and that there exists, therefore, in all of us, "a depth of darkness." The dialogue thus does not move from a starting point of "not-knowing" to an end-point of "knowing." Over the issue of knowledge the Theaetetus truncates itself, denies itself closure or transcendence, and reaffirms the insoluble difficulty of reading. Philosophy over the centuries has aimed at an absolute, solid ground from which it could speak. But the Theaetetus already disperses this elegant hope. If what we know is contaminated by (implicated in) how we know, then we have no privileged point from which to view the object of discussion, and thus no claim to objectivity or to telling the true from the false. Plato's dialogue teaches us that we don't know what we know, and more troubling yet, we don't know what we don't know. Centuries later, Nietzsche will call truths "illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions" (Nietzsche, 1964, p. 180), and Freud will recognize, like Plato, our radical otherness to ourselves, the ultimate unreadability of our psyches.

In the American grain, a fair question would be--what do philosophy and psychoanalysis have to do with reading? The question of reading in America has been relegated to departments of English and Schools of Education, with the result that "reading" has been associated with "literacy" in its narrow definition, the definition that precisely bypasses the question of difficulty. Literacy, in its philological relation to "literature," means, of course, how

to read, but also "how to read." And on the issue of reading in the profounder sense American education has been thoroughly resistant to change.

Two reasons for this resistance stand out. One is the idea that anything difficult is elitist, that democracy demands simplicity. This is a particularly pernicious notion to a country and a culture. At the political level, it means that issues and problems have to be reduced to the lowest common denominator; at the university level, it results in an anti-intellectual attitude that makes a mockery of the idea of education. Last year a graduate student auditing several undergraduate courses as part of a pedagogical project commented to me that he had problems with tough grading because such a policy perpetuates a system where the more socially and economically advantaged students receive the higher grades. The sentiment is admirable, yet lowering the level of difficulty in a class so that all grades might be high is hardly the answer to the issues of mass education. A better answer might be to widen the question of reading so that reading encompasses not just the encounter with the printed word but "life, the universe, and everything"--so that the difficulty of thought touches the students' own lives and makes that difficulty accessible to them.

A second reason for the resistance to "difficulty" is that difficulty in the practice of reading has by and large arisen out of "alien" disciplines--philosophy and psychoanalysis in particular--and American education up until the last few years, and for several decades, has been severely compartmentalized. Philosophical writings were the province of philosophy, history belonged to history, and so on. One effect of this compartmentalizing has been that individual departments have come to perceive their own disciplines as a "science," eschewing the kinds of interdisciplinary relations that would precisely put into question (render "difficult") the solid and absolute ground upon which the discipline perceives itself coming to rest. When the Theaetetus suggests that we cannot know anything apart from the act of knowing, it gives the lie to the scientific ground of any discipline: it underscores the rhetorical basis of all knowledge. This may be why the Theaetetus is not often taught in philosophy departments. Nietzsche says we can define a discipline in terms of what it forbids its practitioners to do, and that suppression has invariably been a suppression of the problematic, of the difficult, of the unstable. It has been a suppression of "reading" itself.

Surprisingly, this suppression is often actively pursued in literature departments, where texts are at times understood to be representations of experience or culture, and criticism to be a matter of "approaches" or "methods." While it would be foolish to suggest that texts have nothing to do with culture and experience, the direct and unproblematic linking of the two bypasses the act of reading. If a text is said to be a representation of culture, or individual experience, then the assumption is that language is a transparent element, that it communicates without altering, that it reflects but does not constitute the object of discussion. At the high school level, but also, often, at the college level, this assumption goes without saying. The moment character, or plot, or description are brought to rest on an external given, on a stable and determinable context, the text as such disappears--it is truly rendered transparent and invisible because all its density, all that renders it problematic or difficult, has been dispelled.

In the past, this model of mastery over the linguistic object has been true as well of relations between disciplines, and this notion of language as transparent medium has given disciplines the space to constitute themselves as a science, uncompromised by rhetoric. Thus history has been known to deal with "events" and "facts," philosophy with conceptual, abstract thought, mathematics with natural laws. Yet this "dealing with" their objects has been nothing

other than a "reading" of those objects, a reading that far from being innocent and straightforward has in some measure determined and constituted those objects. Reading as representation, in all its innocence and simplicity, is superseded here by reading as interpretation, where what is known and certain and stable is dispelled under the pressure of interrogation.

This idea of reading as an interpretive, creative activity has transformed the relations between one discipline and another and has made difficult determining the boundaries between them. Philosophy figures most prominently in this new relationship, inasmuch as philosophy's quest for transcendence is based on the very notion of solid ground which reading as interpretation does away with. If some of Plato's dialogues were problematic in terms of their relationship to the concept of the absolute, Aristotle's treatises appear as a more secure, measured response--a closing off of the gaps which the Platonic dialogues open up. Over and over again Aristotle claims that the way to knowledge lies in classification and enclosure. Whether one is classifying plants or types of writing, the critical activity in Aristotle is supposedly distinct from the object of study, and thus the object of study can be read in all its facets and comprehended (in the strict sense of being surrounded on all sides). In Aristotle's metaphysics, true knowledge is possible, and it authorizes a whole range of classificatory activities designed to keep what is known in place. Nothing could make us feel more secure than to know that we know, and what we know. No depth of darkness here. Expressions of this Aristotelian metaphysics are everywhere in our culture. While buying a new car, I noticed a stunning description of its design: "Concise lines make a clear statement. They don't trouble people by disappearing here and there. The lines of the Volvo 760 GLE have a beginning and an end. They are consistent, genuine, and honest." Far more than a plug for a boxy car, this is an affirmation of form and the authority of knowledge.

Yet Aristotle is himself haunted by those disappearing lines. In the midst of his major discourse on form, The Poetics, he defines metaphor as the giving of a name to something to which the name does not belong. If figures of speech name wrongly, that is, if figures of speech are, precisely, "tropes," turnings from the object rather than direct representations of it, then a language constituted by such tropes will problematize the question of reading (see Derrida, 1982). Any reading that moves self-consciously into the path of these disappearing lines, that contemplates not what it knows but how it can come to know anything at all, will take us rapidly from certainty to uncertainty, from sure answers to unanswerable questions, from stable centers to disappearing lines and dislocated boundaries. If reading is a dangerous activity, this is because it has the potential to disrupt everything that we know, to make our consciousness aware of what it cannot name or encompass, in short, to make us aware of "death." This is not to detract from the power of death in all its physical manifestations, but to say that death signals above all what de Man (1984) calls "a linguistic predicament": the impossibility of transparence, the difficulty of reading (p. 81).

An entire philosophical tradition is troubled by this impossibility, but the difficulty troubles every other discipline as well and therefore affects the very structure of the university, the way in which knowledge is produced and authorized. In its most stable version, the university is a place where knowledge is imparted--a knowledge that for the most part is secure, significant, and unchangeable. But if reading is an interpretive, creative activity, then the university becomes the place where knowledge is produced, and such production is never innocent (see Culler, 1987; Godsich, 1988). The university as producer of knowledge has the power to constitute in large measure the objects of that knowledge, and this makes it important

that such production be carried out as a self-conscious activity.

That self-consciousness is most often resisted, because it entails whole disciplines coming to terms with the problems of what happens when they organize themselves as disciplines, what they include and exclude, how those choices are made: in short, their "history." This is the area that Nietzsche claims a discipline forbids its practitioners to enter, so that it functions as a discipline's unconscious, something that it knows but cannot know it knows. And when such knowledge is brought to the foreground, as it has today by recent critical concerns, then the discipline undergoes a crisis. History offers a good example of this trajectory. For at least a century, historians had stressed the scientific basis of historical inquiry (the equivalent of the philosopher's absolute ground), so that the historian's account was supposed to have a solid reference point. Suppressed from this scheme was the possibility that the "event" the historian deals with might be constructed by the telling. This is not to say that the historian invents her subject, or that the event as such never took place, but that we have no access to it in any original sense. Language is our access to it, and language transforms the thing it touches. What we know of an event in history is thus enfolded within the historian's story. The great historians, says Hayden White, always knew this, and built that knowledge into a rhetorical self-consciousness that distinguishes them from the rest. This foregrounding of rhetoric in relation to "content" or "reference" brings about a crisis of knowledge in historical studies (see Orr, 1986; White, 1973, 1978). What is at stake is the authority of historical narrative, and the very nature of our understanding of what we call the outside world. The concept of scientific inquiry promises solid ground, but the rhetorical status of that inquiry bears stronger links to desire than to any detached and objective knowledge. The difficulty in this respect is epistemological: what is it that we can be sure we know, in what circuitous ways do the production and the acquisition of knowledge intersect?

The epistemological issue--what is it that we can know when what we know is enfolded in rhetoric--cuts across disciplines, makes them aware of their historicity, denies them access to a totalizing, transcendent ground or the authority of what they know. To focus on the question of knowledge, on its production, is to put into question the cause and effect relations we tend to take for granted, and in turn to throw the legitimacy of what we know, of the organization of disciplines, and of the very structure of the university, into disarray. This is a far cry from Aristotelian logic, where everything, finally, has its place and stays in place, where knowledge is marked by proper beginnings and satisfying endings. Aristotle already suppresses Plato's "depth of darkness," and that suppression constitutes a sort of history of Western thought, authorizing and backing the certainties by which colonization (imaginative and geographical) can occur.

If we take colonization in its most literal meaning, as a historical and geographical appropriation, then we would have to say that American education today takes a clear stance against such zealous intrusions. Yet this avowed anti-colonialist, anti- establishment stance itself constitutes another moment in that history of suppression, for it builds on the necessary assumption of certainty, the empirical dimension by which all political movements seek their goals and legitimate themselves. The very ideology that powers this certainty is deeply embedded in the suppression of that "depth of darkness," complicitous with the very structures of thought it seeks to dismantle. Political "causes" are built on a logical cause and effect relation: "this" problem is caused by "that" situation, and if we attack the cause we will be able to rectify the problem and bring things to proper closure. What is left out of this neat paradigm is the kind of problematizing which questions, among other things, the neatness of

cause and effect relations, the simplicity of the law of context, the stability of "inside" and "outside." The questioning of this relation is at once a questioning of the status quo and of the forces that seek to uproot it. To "problematize" is to bring an issue to difficulty, to raise doubts about the certainties that fuel missionary zeal. Thus the most radical questioning of the legitimacy of knowledge and of the function of the university has come not from the expected quarters--political, ideological, historical orientations--but from the persistent speculations on origins and cause and effect relations which have marked "critical theory" in the past two decades. The resistance to theory has come not only from academic departments and disciplines which insist on retaining their scientific status, but also from political constituencies who demand a cure for their marginalization. Problematization and difficulty are eschewed because they are not readily sloganizable, and because to problematize is in a very real sense to defer solution and closure, almost as if the act of problem solving stood in opposition to genuine understanding instead of being a natural consequence of it.

Much of the history of critical theory and the history of political stances in the academy is entangled in this issue of understanding and legitimation. The literary Marxism of the thirties (sometimes referred to as "monolithic Marxism") assumed the stability of context, of an outside given, and situated texts within those stable historical contexts. "History" itself was not placed under interrogation. Part of the impetus of the New Criticism was a response to this straightforward contextualizing of texts, to the point that texts disappeared into this outside which they were said to represent. New Criticism affirmed the in-itselfness of the work, its authority, its legitimacy, and its firm boundaries. Drawing its impetus from Aristotle's theory of form, but discarding the implications of his theory of metaphor, new critics argued that the literary work has a meaning within its confines, and that tension, ambiguity, paradox, irony all lead to a climactic resolution. Formalism focused on the aesthetic importance of the literary object, separated it from the domain of culture and history, idealized it. The literary text appeared frozen in space, complete within itself, untouched by time or reading. It was itself its own context. And difficulty was persistently dispelled by the achieved resolution and the meaning proposed by that resolution. Formalism tended to perceive difficulty primarily embodied in elaborate and recondite allusions, but allusions were ultimately drawn into the meaning of the work at hand. They could be researched, hunted down, appropriated, held in place. On the face of it, traditional Marxism and formalism could not be further apart. Marxism historized literature, while formalism aestheticized it. Yet formalism repeated the very gestures of the method it opposed: both engaged in a practice of offering answers, solutions, meaning, and thus in a strategy of unveiling truth and marginalizing difficulty.

This strategy is prevalent today in the persistent demand in the academy to assimilate the discourses of women and minorities--to give a voice to the oppressed and thus redress historical wrongs in the most direct, representational way. As in the case of my graduate student, the attitude is admirable, but in terms of critical theory it repeats yet once more the gestures of the patriarchal/colonialist stance it seeks to displace (see Spivak, 1989). Traditional feminist and minority approaches rely on the authority of experience and its representability in language. Experience shapes writing, and writing expresses it. Thus literature becomes the representation of culture, without either category of "literature" or "culture" being problematized, "put into question." The paradox is that representation is a profoundly conservative approach whose epistemology overlaps with that of patriarchal and colonialist discourses. The more traditional feminist and minority approaches, structured along the lines of a theory of representation, thus exhibit a strange complicity with the very power structures they oppose. The authority of these power structures depends on the invisible being made visible, and thus possessed and mastered.

"The very act of rendering visible," says Sharon Willis, "expresses a capture, and a power relation" (Vickers, 1986, p. 34). Malek Alloula (1986) remarks on this desire for visibility in his study of a series of postcards of Algerian women during French colonization, and observes that the "brutal idiom" of the colonial postcard renders public what was until now "invisible or hidden" (p. 118). The desire for transparence and representation underwrites this particular colonialist discourse, until a whole society "ceases to be opaque, in the imaginary at least," and thus appears to have been "pacified" (p. 64). Visibility dispels that depth of darkness; it states the authority and legitimacy of possession and expresses the possibility of meaning and control. Thus both formalism and traditional feminism suppress difficulty--one by resolving it into closure, the other by supplanting it with the certainty of ideology (of "what goes without saying"). The demand for "ideology," "consensus," "commitment" may be politically correct, but it halts the movement of speculation by yielding answers that invoke the authority of empirical evidence and lived experience in the same way that the sciences invoke "scientific method." While these two models, the representation of reality and the idealization of the work, appear antithetical to one another, they share a basic mistrust of interrogation that doesn't get to the point, and whose effect is to demystify and de-authorize the premises upon which these perspectives come to rest. Resistance to traditional power structures begins, especially in contemporary (post)feminism, as a resistance to the rhetoric of representation, of the visible, the transparent, the "clearly there," the formally contained (see Jacobus, 1986; Miller, 1986). And this resistance, in all its difficulty, finds its fullest expression in a criticism within which "theory" undermines the basic assumptions of objectivity that make knowledge possible. Difficulty opposes itself to ideology because in an ultimate sense it is synonymous with a conflict for which no solution can be posited, with a contradiction that attends every attempt at understanding. "Contradiction," says Adorno in Negative Dialectics, "indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived." The remainder, or excess, is the extra piece in the completed puzzle, and as such it reopens the path of interrogation. Problematizing the issue means that solution, closure, cure are deferred, that the gap or hiatus between problem and solution cannot be bridged, that understanding is not geared to the effacement of difficulty but to a deepening, self-conscious recognition of it as an "untranscendable horizon."

There is no question that "critical theory" has been "difficult" in recent years. Part of the difficulty lies with its jargon and with its deliberate attempt to break the illusion of lucidity, the illusion that language is a transparent entity and that "man" is in control of it. The jargon can be mastered, and even appropriated. But the effect of this thinking was to put into question chronology, narrative, sequence, and representability-- in short, our very experience of time and our sense that we know where we are and who we are at any given moment because we know who and where we have been: the ultimate expression of "representability" is "identity." If we are not in control of language, if we (and language) are haunted by a depth of darkness, then our past becomes a function of our present, an endless re-narration within which identity shifts and remains infinitely elusive. Who we are may well depend on who we narrate ourselves to be, on the elaborate filiations we draw between events that are lost to us in the density of what we call experience.

The most dramatic expression of this reversal of expected cause and effect relations is brought forth in Freud's case history of the Wolf Man. There may well be other dramatic expressions, but this is the one that critical theory has focused on, so that it functions almost as a metonymy of this questioning of logical sequence and of the possibility of representative discourse. (On the Wolf Man and its implications, see Brooks, 1984; Culler, 1982; Lukacher,

1986; Warner, 1986.) In this case history, Freud tries to give a "history"; that is, to "give" a history, to unveil an etiology of the patient's neurosis, to establish that first there was this cause, and then came these effects. What results from this case history is the opposite. Having surmised that the man's neurosis stems from the child's witnessing of his parents' intercourse, Freud then recognizes that this "primal scene" does not become traumatic until years later, when another event triggers it into memory and renders it traumatic. The earlier event is logically the cause of the trauma, but the later event is just as logically the cause of the earlier event becoming traumatic. Cause and effect here are hopelessly confused, and problematized by Freud's own narrative, layered by revisions and bracketed insertions. It is impossible to locate an "origin" or cause because we are always implicated in the construction or narration of that origin or cause. Indeed, Freud goes on to suggest that the primal scene is itself a construct or "phantasy." Origins, like myths, are imagined things, and theory for Freud becomes akin to phantasy, inextricably bound to the wish, to what we want to "see." Far from narration being a cure (coming to an end), it becomes a repeated expression of the disease. When Dickinson says that we "cannot see to see" she is expressing this impossibility of getting beyond that depth of darkness. When we truly see, we see that darkness, the density that cannot be mastered, and to which we give the name of "death."

It may well be that critical theory (of the poststructuralist sort) has been overly concerned with death. But death becomes a "topic" in criticism because it stands metonymically for what is unthematizable, unrepresentable, unnameable, unteachable--and thus for an insoluble difficulty which is synonymous with thought itself. Death becomes another trope for contradiction, for the otherness which haunts us; it is the end which we cannot possess, and which renders all our possessions improper.

All this is "difficult" stuff, and it flies in the face of what Lyotard calls "the ideology of transparency," by which language and knowledge and learning are systematized--into composition courses, into criticism courses, into creative writing workshops, into the "proper" arrangement of knowledge, so that nothing is lost, all is recuperated into some classification, some form. The name for such arrangement is "method," and its subtext is "science." It may be in the very nature of academic institutions to formalize learning and knowledge and thus to subscribe to this ideology of transparency. But the cost of this ideology is nothing less than thinking itself. Heidegger takes a dim view of "method" and all its formalist underpinnings: "Method, especially in today's modern scientific thought, is not a mere instrument serving the sciences; rather, it has pressed the sciences into its own service." And Nietzsche is as explicit: "It is not the victory of science that distinguishes our nineteenth century, but the victory of scientific method over science" (Bruns, 1989, p. 110). Method in American education is today the fancy name for a "how to" approach to life and learning. It is fueled by a pragmatic desire for efficiency which privileges clarity over density and knowing where you are over wandering or allowing yourself to get lost. Thus method becomes a kind of all-encompassing cartography without a history, displacing error (and errancy) and getting "it" right. Even (especially) in the realm of theory, the most common complaint is that some critics are just "too difficult," and the demand placed on theory is that it "do its job" and clarify the whole mess of frayed thinking, giving out some decent labels and classifying (possessing) the landscape. In America at least, the demands placed on the intellectual scene are not all that different from those placed on the public sphere. Be clear--communicate. What is lost in this demand, in the Heideggerian sense, is the depth of darkness we inhabit, our homelessness, our exile, the very condition of thinking itself. "By continually appealing to the logical," says Heidegger (1977), "one conjures up the illusion that he is entering straightforwardly into thinking when in fact he has disavowed it" (p.

227). Heidegger insists on the importance of Plato's depth of darkness and intimates that thinking is a kind of lingering in the area of the unrepresentable. The difficult work of thought demands that we learn to read slowly, that we "linger," that we allow ourselves to get lost in "paths" that are not mapped. And certain strands of critical theory seem to have heeded Heidegger's call.

Thinkers like Lacan and Derrida have drawn theory into a path of speculation that specifically rejects the possibility of metatheory, of classification, clarification, understanding in the sense of seeing "the whole" from some privileged point of view. If what we know is inseparable from how we know, then theory and practice are not separable, with theory functioning as "method" and practice as the playing out of method, but are implicated in and contaminated by one another. Far from functioning as a metalanguage, this sort of criticism points to the impossibility of any systematizing method, of any metatheory that would not already be implicated in the very problems it would seek to resolve (see Young, 1981). What emerges from this is a philosophy of the fragment, and a theoretical criticism which identifies reading with estrangement and difficulty.

For a country which places its faith in speed and efficiency--the manifestations of which run a whole gamut from speed reading courses to drive-in churches--this kind of thinking is disruptive and pointless. Our aim is always to make texts appear less strange, more accessible, assimilable to our culture and therefore more transparent--like the rewriting of the New Revised Version of the Bible. At the other end of the spectrum are poets like Holderlin or Dickinson, who remain radically strange or estranged from us, and who beckon us into an interstice where difficulty is fully played out. Poetry inhabits a space where logic and clarity do not hold sway, where language opens up strange paths that defy all our intellectual classifications and attempts at possession. As Gerald Bruns (1989) so eloquently shows us, in such spaces we are not in control--of our language, of ourselves, of the poem and its meaning. And when we encounter this kind of "difficulty," we are at the beginning of thinking.

Just what kind of reading does a difficult poet entice us into? What consequences would a more stable reading of the same poet entail? And how do we "democratize" access to difficulty without making difficulty disappear into method? Dickinson is a good choice with which to open these questions, because she is so thoroughly resistant to method that she makes evident the limits of ideological and formalist stances. Formalist editors in the 40's and 50's routinely substituted normal punctuation for her dashes, gave the poems titles, and arranged them thematically. On occasion, some editor would even lop off an unwanted stanza that reopened an interrogation which by the end of the poem should have been closed. Feminist criticism of the 70's, in turn, would read her, 30's fashion, in terms of cultural context and sexual identity, suppressing the ambiguities of history and gender.

On the issue of difficulty, Dickinson is a slippery poet to deal with, because there are times when she appears infinitely accessible and clear--until she has teased us into a strange space or depth where nothing is its solid self. Two summers ago I was in Uruguay, where I grew up, and I was asked to return to my old high school to give a talk to 13- and 14-year-olds on Dickinson. I decided to evade difficulty altogether, and chose a poem which appeared almost transparent in its theme and its direction:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides--
You may have met Him--did you not
His notice sudden is--

The Grass divides as with a Comb--
A spotted shaft is seen--
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on--

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn--
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot--
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled and was gone--

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me--
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality--

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone--

There is fear in this poem, and it is not unreasonable to connect that fear to the slimy and slithering figure of the snake. Yet the child (boy, girl--another whole story here) is curious without being fearful. He attempts to touch it, and the creature propels itself by wrinkling up and shooting forward--and it's gone. The meditation of the poem has nothing to do with fear of snakes. It has to do with the disappearance of an object without a trace of its passage. The grass opens with the passage of the snake, then closes up again, as if that passage had never taken place.

All this takes place "at Noon," a moment of coincidence and perfection, a moment of "identity." Identity is so problematic in Dickinson that even the terms "self," "soul," and "consciousness" seem to be opposed to it rather than synonymous with it. In another poem ("1056") Dickinson imagines a moment so perfect that "Consciousness is Noon": self and world, consciousness and its reflection, become one. All otherness disappears at this moment, giving way to an unimaginable oneness. The self is transparent to itself, and transparent in the perpendicular light of the sun.

At Noon, in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," there is no such coincidence, almost as if these poems were written under the sign of an eclipse. The snake disappears without a trace, the grass springs back as if nothing had ever divided it. And the fear is that the self, too, may

leave no trace of itself, that it may be, as Freud suggests, a fiction that we weave about ourselves, a fiction of identity which in Dickinson's poems explodes into alterity. In the lingo of American ego psychology, alterity can be subsumed within identity, just as the unconscious can be rendered transparent and assimilated by the ego. But Dickinson resists such transparence or assimilation. What we are left with in this poem is an absence that nothing can fill, a gap that is constitutive of what Dickinson calls "Soul" and which in this poem she terms "Zero at the Bone." Zero is a "number" that stands for no-number. If you multiply or subtract or add in relation to it, nothing happens. An entity that is not an entity, that is defined only by what is not there, triggers the unreasonable fear at the passage of the snake. At the "heart" or "center" of ourselves, skeleton or soul, stands the Zero, a circumference signifying absence. When in another poem Dickinson says that she "went out upon Circumference / Beyond the Dip of Bell," she is suggesting that she went out into nothing, a nothing that is epitomized by the outer reaches of the universe, but also by the innermost reaches of what we call a "self." In the deepest relationship with ourselves, identity is interrupted by contradiction or alterity, so that to see ourselves is to see that we are not "ourselves," a "self."

To feel "real," we have to be able to leave a mark, to mark our passage through the world, but above all, to mark our passage through ourselves. But if all we are is memories narrated along the lines of desire, what mark or trace can we hope to leave of our passage? What mark or trace can a poem--which is also a "passage"--hope to leave? Dickinson knows this, and her poems function as intervals, interruptions, gaps--moments in consciousness in which consciousness is aware of what is not there, what it cannot comprehend--its "death." Walter Benjamin tells us that we read in order to find out about endings, in the hope that they will teach us about our own end, which we can never experience or appropriate. Dickinson unveils the futility of that hope. At their most powerful, her poems interrupt, breach, wound what we call consciousness or identity or self or the "real Me." Stealthily, like the snake crawling out of trace in the grass, she enacts a disappearance, which is our own.

I would not dream of burdening 13- and 14-year-olds with this meditation. But I did ask them what they might define as frightening, and the discussion moved from monster movies, where gory-looking creatures become visible on screen, to more invisible and more frightening things--things whose effects you can feel, but whose causes you cannot see--like the ramifications of a snake passing through the grass, like the feeling of not being "fully here." Identity, ego, consciousness--these are the hope of presence, reality, self. Dickinson interrupts that presence with her famous dashes, and those dashes become tropes for what cannot be named, for what cannot be understood, comprehended, seen, assimilated into consciousness, wrought into identity. While this may be too abstract even for 18-year-olds, it can be rendered more accessible by invoking, as a first step, cultural artifacts they do know. The photograph album, the souvenir, the collection, as Stewart (1984) has shown us, raise these kinds of issues of appropriation and estrangement. At the most obvious level, Dickinson can be thematized and brought under control. We can say that she is cloistered, in love, out of touch. Or that poems about snakes are really poems about snakes. But if we let her difficulty have its range, we will see why she defines herself as an interval, "the term between." "I found the words for every thought / I ever had--but One--" she says. And that one thought for which there is no name and which renders what is known and named a fragment is what we term death: an absence of consciousness from itself, a fragmented self, a fragmentary text. The dash is not a dash in Dickinson. It is a trope for what cannot be uttered, for what is unnameable and unteachable, but which we need to try to teach again and again.

It may be that this kind of reading of Dickinson, which begins with a deceptive simplicity and proceeds to tease out the difficulties and the alienness, would cure students of reading Dickinson for a long time. But perhaps it also needs to be said again and again that education is in its very nature an elitist proposition. Its purpose is not to translate difficulty into concepts assimilable by culture but, on the contrary, to estrange, to ask what is constitutive of knowledge and the process we call thinking, and to render the culture which surrounds us and which we take for granted problematic. To teach about difficulty is in some sense to work against the grain of educational efficiency, yet there may be no more important task in American higher education. At some point, Dickinson ceases to be translatable into available cultural terms, and that is the area students must be enticed to enter if they are to engage in the difficult work of thought.

But what of poets who are more available, who yield themselves to our understanding without taking us into the circuitous paths of Dickinson? Is level of difficulty going to become the standard for canonicity? Or is difficulty embedded in the critical assumptions we bring to texts? This is the unanswerable question Longinus raises in a different key when he asks whether a poem's power is derived from genius or technique. His answer bypasses (or exceeds) his question: the power of the poem has to do with a moment of figuration in which the reader feels she has created what she has only heard. We may term this moment internalizing, even appropriation, but it is also the other side of estrangement. Dickinson is obviously more "difficult" than Frost, yet this does not mean that Frost cannot be problematized.

When Frost ends his major poem, "Directive," with the injunction to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion," he is speaking a particularly American dialect. He is suggesting, as formalism did, that difficulty can be transcended, that fragmentation is just a departure from normative wholeness. Frost is known as the simple, straightforward, accessible poet, yet his simplest poems are not so easy to deal with. "The Road Not Taken," for instance, appears to be a poem about choice. Yet choice, with all its humanistic implications of selfhood, authority, mastery over our lives, turns out to be another name for chance. Frost's efforts in the poem are directed towards stating the difference between this road and that and narrating a sequence of events (I chose this road, and I have ended up here, and I will be telling this same story in the future). He articulates a narrative that comes to some sort of end in a proleptic/retrospective meditation, underwritten by a cause-and-effect etiology. Yet the poem, like the case history of the Wolf Man, doubles back upon itself to tell the opposite story. While he states the differences between one road and another, Frost also tells us that both roads are ultimately the same--trod and worn the same, equally inviting--and his choice, or what he terms his choice, is a random one. "Way leads to way" with frightening randomness, and each step makes the past (the fork, the moment of choice, the possibility of foresight) irretrievable. This is a dark and devious poem, suggesting that the choices that we make are chancy choices, and that only belatedly, "ages and ages hence," do we construct a pattern and a direction for our choice. We tell ourselves that our initial choice is "[what] has made all the difference," but choice is the retrospective fiction that we weave about our lives, in an attempt to contain the more dangerous "difference" which undoes our potential for wholeness.

Dickinson confronts us with extreme metaleptic reversals that throw off the possibility of chronology or narrative sequence. But because Frost seems to settle so strongly on such a sequence, the tendency to take him at his word, to not double back, is overwhelming. Frost appears already so thoroughly thematized that he provides us with a surface hard to break. And one might well ask--why should we want to break it? Why not just take it for what it is, for

the enjoyment it provides? Why can't a poem about a choice of two roads be a poem about choices that affect our lives? Because that hard surface functions as "what goes without saying," a given which inhibits thought, and we need to raise the kinds of questions that will get our students "lost" rather than "found." They need to know that moving from "a poem about two roads" to "a poem about choices that affect our lives" is already an interpretation, a trope, and that a reading worthy of its name does not stop there. In this respect, reading involves making a text work against itself, against its own smooth, seamless surface, and perhaps in this light Frost requires a lot more work than Dickinson.

If the work of theory is a problematizing of reading, a teasing out of difficulty, then theory stands in an oppositional relation to the institution. This is not only because institutional pressure is towards method, efficiency, communication, and the rigorous reliability of science, but more importantly because theory ultimately puts the institution itself into question--its role, its organization, its relation to knowledge. For a variety of reasons, the sciences (especially the social sciences) have fit in well with institutional demands and flourished in the academy. It is now the job of the Humanities to problematize "method" and engage the classroom and the university in the paths of difficulty.

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